Chapter 8

Academic Writing Activity: Student Writing in Transition

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Introduction

This chapter will focus on the writing students describe as they move through levels of higher education in two institutional contexts: a small group of universities and disciplines in France and Belgium, and a single university and several disciplines in the United States. The studies done in each context provide insight into student perception of the writing produced, the challenges and obstacles, and the transitions that the students experience. The writing they are describing is named, in the United States, “academic” writing and in France, “university” writing for undergraduates and “scientific” writing for masters level and beyond, the point at which students are learning to write theses and dissertations, much closer to actual research scholarship (see also Rinck and Boch, this volume).1 Our purpose here is to explore their sense of this writing in ways that allow us to describe their experiences in writing as they move through higher education, as well as the writing activities they perceive and how this perception develops our understanding of academic-scientific university genres. The work across two cultural contexts sharpens and highlights our understanding of each context while drawing on different traditions of study.

1“Scientific” is a term that applies to all disciplines in France, not only the hard sciences.
University Writing: Texts Specified by Disciplines

In this section, we offer background about the institutional contexts of the two studies: the authors’ situations, populations studied, and the traditions of writing research and teaching that frame the studies.

The French and Belgian study took place as part of a funded project carried out at l’Université de Lille III in France, where the didactics research group Théodile-CIREL is organized. This group includes researchers from Lille, Paris, and Belgium. It was a collaborative effort with the research group LIDILEM at l’Université de Grenoble in Grenoble, France. The students included in the study were from these institutions. The U.S. study was situated at a small public liberal arts college in Maine, and carried out by the director of first-year writing and a team of scholars from six different disciplines. The students in the study attended this college from 2004 to 2008.

U.S. Research and Teaching Traditions

In the United States, the attention paid to writing in contexts other than the first year of university studies has developed over time in two complementary strands, the “writing across the curriculum” strand and the “writing in the disciplines” strand. The first is generally understood as supporting the use of writing to learn curricular material in any discipline and the second is generally seen as focused on entering into writing in a particular discipline, although of course there are overlapping interests (see Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2009). What that “entering in” might look like is the subject of much debate and discussion, as various researchers support different approaches — an epistemological approach, a convention-driven teaching approach, or a genre approach, to cite the most frequent divisions (see, Prior and Bilbro, this volume, for an in-depth discussion of the different ways academic enculturation is modeled).

The U.S. WAC and WiD fields have been in some ways insular from other fields that study student learning generally at the university, although they have much to exchange. In more recent years, U.S. writing researchers have broadened their knowledge base, consulting with researchers from various disciplines who affect scholarship of teaching and learning, researchers in the field of education, and researchers focused on the sociology of various fields — education, science, and so on. Certainly the overall work in this domain is affected by the types of U.S. institutions of higher education in play: “research one” universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, public comprehensive institutions, specialized (military, maritime, environmental …)

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2 A prime example of this is the “WAC” Clearinghouse’s deep and ongoing attention to both WAC and WiD. In fact, McLeod and Maimon argued the two strands are fully complementary, and positions WAC as the umbrella, with WiD as a part of WAC (cited in Petrucci, 2002).